

MY PETRIFIED BIRD'S-NEST.

BY HARLAN H. BALLARD.

SOME months ago, a man who was working for a lady in one of the larger towns of Pennsylvania brought her a very beautiful nest, containing three small white eggs.

"Why, Hans," she exclaimed, "where in the world did you find it?"

Hans replied that while he had been removing some stones from a ledge of lime-rock by the banks of the creek that flowed near the town he had discovered the nest on a projecting ledge, "unt I nodiced, lady, dot dere vas a schmall zdream of vasser drigglin' down ofer dot nezd. Mebbe it vos lime-vasser dot made id zo hart like a sdone." The recipient of this unusual gift had not before noticed that it was, indeed, hard and heavy, and to all appearances completely petrified, or, at least, incrustated with a white calcareous deposit. The three eggs in it were, like the nest itself, entirely covered with the limy incrustation. "Dere vas anudder," Hans remarked, with a tone of regret and mortification; and, as if impelled to the confession by the power of a strong conscience, "bud I brogue id als I vas geddin' down from d' gliff. I vos fery zorry." With these words Hans withdrew, almost overcome by the gracious words of gratitude which followed him to the door.

After he had gone there was an opportunity for a close examination of the wonderful specimen. All the family were called in, and all agreed in declaring it the most beautiful natural curiosity they had ever seen.

"See, Mamma," cried little Mary, "it looks exactly as if it were made of moss."

"Undoubtedly it was," replied her mother; "do you not remember that piece of petrified moss Uncle Professor used to show you?"

"Yes, indeed, Mamma; and this is precisely like it, only made into this lovely nest. I wonder what kind of bird made it! Oh, here comes Will! he'll know; he knows everything about birds. Will, come here, and see this beautiful petrified bird's-nest! Hans found it on a ledge over by the creek."

"Petrified grandmother!" said Will, irreverently; but as his eyes fell on the graceful lines of the nest, in which each little curving twig and twining hair was perfectly outlined, he whistled, and exclaimed in an entirely different tone, "By

gracious, where in time did you get that? It's — a — dandy!"

Will now proceeded to give the nest an examination in what he was pleased to consider a thoroughly scientific manner. Each tiny root and blade of incrustated grass was scrutinized in turn. It was wonderful to see his boyish hands, sometimes so carelessly used upon fragile household articles as to be declared "clumsy," touching this delicate fabric as daintily as an artist. A boy may break your china vase, but never the infinitely more fragile porcelain of the eggs in his "collection."

"Well, sir, what is it?" said Mamma, after a few minutes had passed.

"It's a petrified phebe's nest," said the young ornithologist. "Phebes make their nests of green moss, and line them with rootlets and little twigs and grass just like this, and they lay little white eggs just this shape, and they always build on a beam or ledge of rock, and nearly always very near a creek. See there," he added, pointing to the end of one tiny stem inside the nest, which had been broken off, "that piece is hollow; it must have been a bit of grass."

"Is n't it rather contrary to our usual notions of bird intelligence that a phebe should place her nest where it should be in danger of so disastrous a flood as this little stream of lime-water has proved?" suggested Mamma.

"Birds often do that sort of thing," said Will; "I've known wrens to build in the sleeve of a coat hanging in the shed, and they have been known to build even in the mouth of a cannon."

When Will's father came home to dinner the nest was shown to him, and he was as much delighted as were the rest of the family. He took it down to his office and placed it in the window, where for many weeks it attracted the attention and aroused the admiration of all who passed that way.

Such was substantially the history of my petrified bird's-nest, prior to last January. At that time a friend of mine in passing the window where it lay, was arrested by its beauty, and, knowing that I was interested in all such things, kindly tried to buy it for me. His proposition was rejected, for no price would be set upon the unique curiosity.



He wrote me a description of it, however, and upon my expressing a strong desire to see it, succeeded in inducing its owners to lend it to him in order that my wish might be gratified.

Rarely have I experienced greater pleasure than when I carefully opened the box in which it had

tion of petrified birds'-nests was found save in Rees's old volumes, where I found fossils divided, according to the Linnæan system, into eight *Genera*, of which the third, *Ornitholithus*, includes "the body or parts of a bird changing into a fossil substance." Under this head is the remark: "The



safely traveled from Pennsylvania to Massachusetts, and with nervous fingers removed the cotton which protected the delicate treasure. I have had a photograph made of the nest as I then saw it, looking down upon it from above, showing the eggs. It corresponded perfectly with the description I had received, but was tenfold more beautiful than I had imagined. I wrote little notices of it for our local papers, and invited all interested in the wonderful works of nature to visit our Athenæum, where it was on exhibition, and inspect it. For a week it was the great attraction. Collectors came and saw and—envied; teachers brought their pupils, and mothers and fathers brought their children to see the wonderful petrified bird's-nest. All were equally enthusiastic. I began to wonder whether the specimen were not really unique. Encyclopædias were consulted. No men-

fossil remains of birds are very rarely met with, although, as Mr. Parkinson says, they are frequently mentioned, and even described, by different authors. Several of those specimens which have been spoken of as petrifications of whole birds, and of their nests, have been merely calcareous incrustations of very modern date."

But even these were only nests, nests without an egg. At this juncture I wrote to my friend in Pennsylvania to try to secure the nest for me. "Offer ten dollars," I wrote; "if that will not buy it, try fifteen; if that is refused, try twenty-five; and if that does not secure it, write me, and I may be willing to go higher still."

About this time I was pleased to see in one of the leading ornithological magazines that the discovery in one of the Southern States of a fossil bird's-egg was made the subject of a communica-

tion before one of our learned societies. What was one egg to a nest with three?

I rather wish that my story could end right here, but truth compels me reluctantly to continue. Among those who came to see the nest while it was on exhibition was one lady, whose manner of looking at it caused me a little annoyance. She did not appear to feel that restraint in its presence which I had remarked in others. She took it in her hands, and turned it upside down to see the bottom of it. I was afraid she would break an egg, and ventured to caution her as to the fragile nature of birds'-eggs in general and petrified birds'-eggs in particular. She smiled and returned the nest to me with the remark that she had one at home of which this one reminded her. The next day she sent hers for my inspection. Judge of my surprise when I found it to be *identical* in form, structure, material, size, and number of eggs. It differed only in color, and she informed me that she had had hers washed before bringing it over! She further informed me that she had procured it some years before from a traveling peddler, and had always supposed it to be the product of art, and man's device. The same day a small boy on seeing my nest remarked, "It's very pretty. My aunt in Saratoga has one just like it."

This was enough. Whether the same "bird" had made all three or not, one thing was evident—the specimen was *not* unique.

Within five minutes a telegram was journeying westward to this effect: "Withdraw all offers for the nest."

Fortunately the message reached its destination in time to prevent the joke on me from becoming too painful. The advantage of a little experience was illustrated by the remark of a distinguished Professor of Natural History when the specimen was mentioned to him. "It is a fraud," said he. "There is a place in Italy where they make these things. They put the nests in water impregnated with mineral salts, and leave them there until they become incrustated, and then sell them to travelers and—fools!"

The most puzzling thing about the nest is, what induced that workman to palm off his nest as he did with no attempt to profit by it? Until this problem is solved there remains a bare possibility that nature has done unaided in America what she frequently does in Italy under the direction of disingenuous peasants.

But, after all, is not a real "live" bird's-nest more beautiful and wonderful than any mere dead petrification ever could be?